

Crackdown in Punjab

Operation Bluestar



NO DECISION could have been more painful, more fraught with tragic consequences, than the one to launch Operation Bluestar. And yet, it was a denouement that was

somehow inevitable. For close to three bloody years, Mrs Gandhi's Government had dithered and dallied as the extremist threat emanating from the Golden Temple, the most sacred symbol of Sikhism and the seat of its religious power, had acquired monstrous proportions. From here, hit-lists had been cold-bloodedly drawn up and death squads dispatched to wreak their deadly havoc—all master-minded by the malevolent figure of Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale. For three long years, the chanting of the gurbani had been punctuated by the staccato bursts of gunfire as the extremists carried out summary executions or exchanged fire with security forces. And now, pushed to the wall, Mrs Gandhi finally did what few could deny had to be done: she gave the signal for Operation Bluestar—the biggest and most significant counter-terrorist action undertaken anywhere in the world.

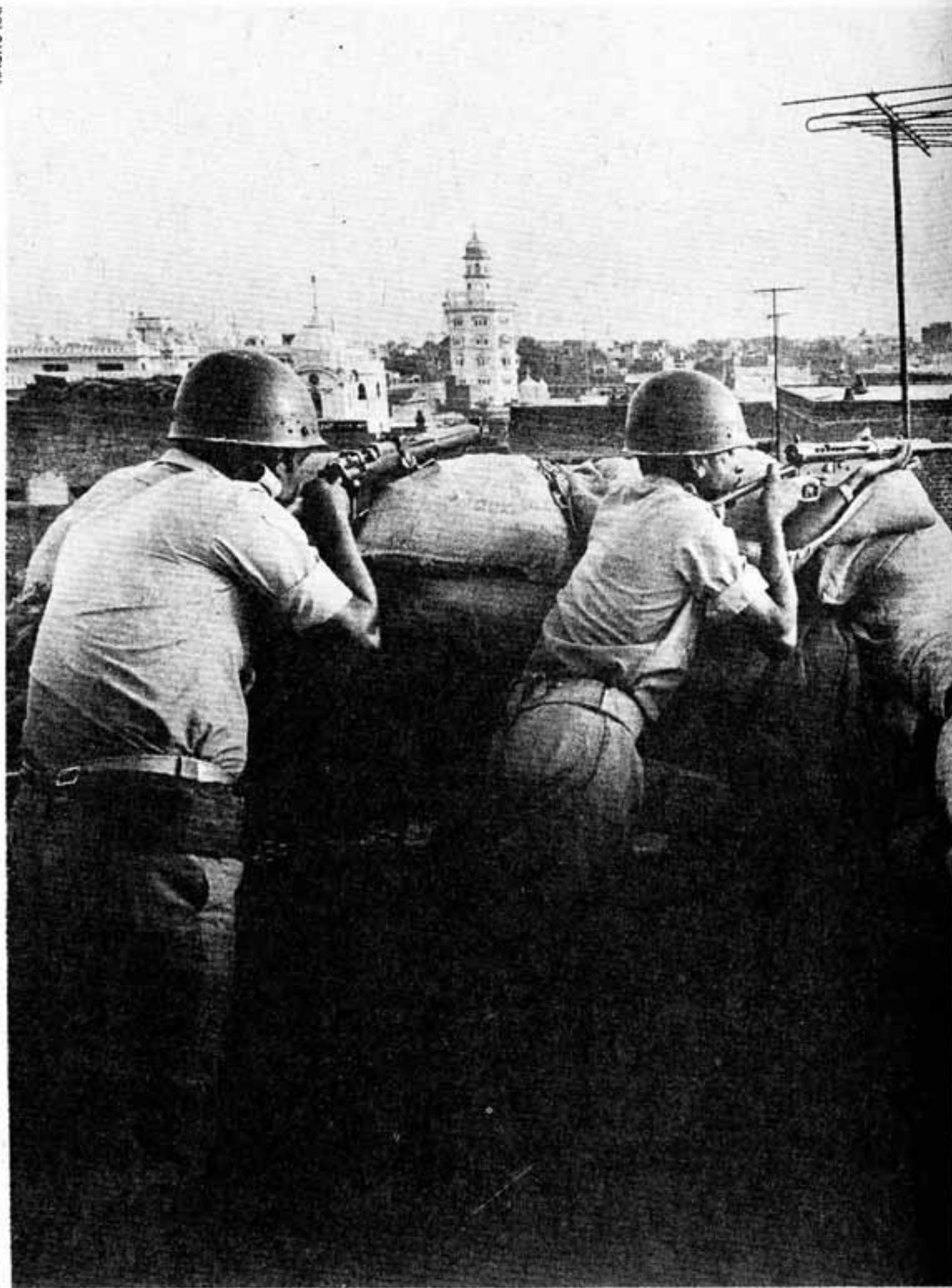
The contingency had been long anticipated even though Operation Bluestar, the code name for the army's move into Punjab against terrorists, was put together in an incredibly short time. In Chakrata, commandos had trained on a large scale replica of the Golden Temple. Consultations were held with the army with increasing frequency and by end-May, when the death-toll from extremist activity rose alarmingly, the decision was made. The signs were evident. In the dark of the night, starting May 30, camouflaged army convoys of the famed 9 Infantry Division based at Meerut started converging on Amritsar and other key towns in Punjab.

President Zail Singh cancelled a visit to the North-east and Army Chief General A.S. Vaidya was hurriedly recalled from Srinagar. In Amritsar itself, the signals were even clearer. Paramilitary forces had been strengthened around

the temple and heavy exchanges of fire with the extremists, some lasting seven continuous hours, took place with the obvious intention of letting the extremists expend ammunition and reveal their newly-fortified positions. At 9 p.m. on June 1, curfew was clamped on the holy city.

Within 24 hours, nearly 70,000 troops culled from the crack fighting formations of the army and paramilitary forces had taken up predetermined positions in the streets of Punjab and fanned out along the thousands of kilometres of roads that link the 12,168 villages in the state.

RAGHU RAI



CRPF jawans keeping guard from a battlement facing the Golden Temple

From then, events moved with bewildering rapidity. On the evening of June 2, Mrs Gandhi went on the air in a nation-wide television broadcast to declare that the Government would put down terrorism and violence in the state and appealed to the Akali leaders to withdraw their agitation planned for the next day to stop movement of grain. She also outlined the framework of a settlement that could be reached on the Punjab problem and asked the Akali Dal to accept it.

But it was clear that the die had been cast. Simultaneously, in a series of ordinances, the Government banned the

entry of foreigners into Punjab, the state governor made an official request to the Centre to call in the army, the media was gagged, rail, road and air services suspended all over the state, and all communication channels snapped. Lt-General Ranjit Singh Dayal, a Sikh, chief of staff, western command, was brought in as security adviser to the governor of Punjab.

The same ruthless efficiency was evident in the way the army laid siege to the temple, initially in the form of the 12th battalion of the Bihar Regiment. Officer-led patrols reconnoitered the area

while others armed with automatic rifles and light machine-guns (LMG's) scaled roof-tops to join the CRPF and BSF men on their sandbagged pickets overlooking the temple. By the evening, however, the strategy had changed. The army commanders realised that the roof-top positions were much too vulnerable to grenade attacks from the extremist pillboxes atop tall 18th century towers and a water tank inside the temple complex.

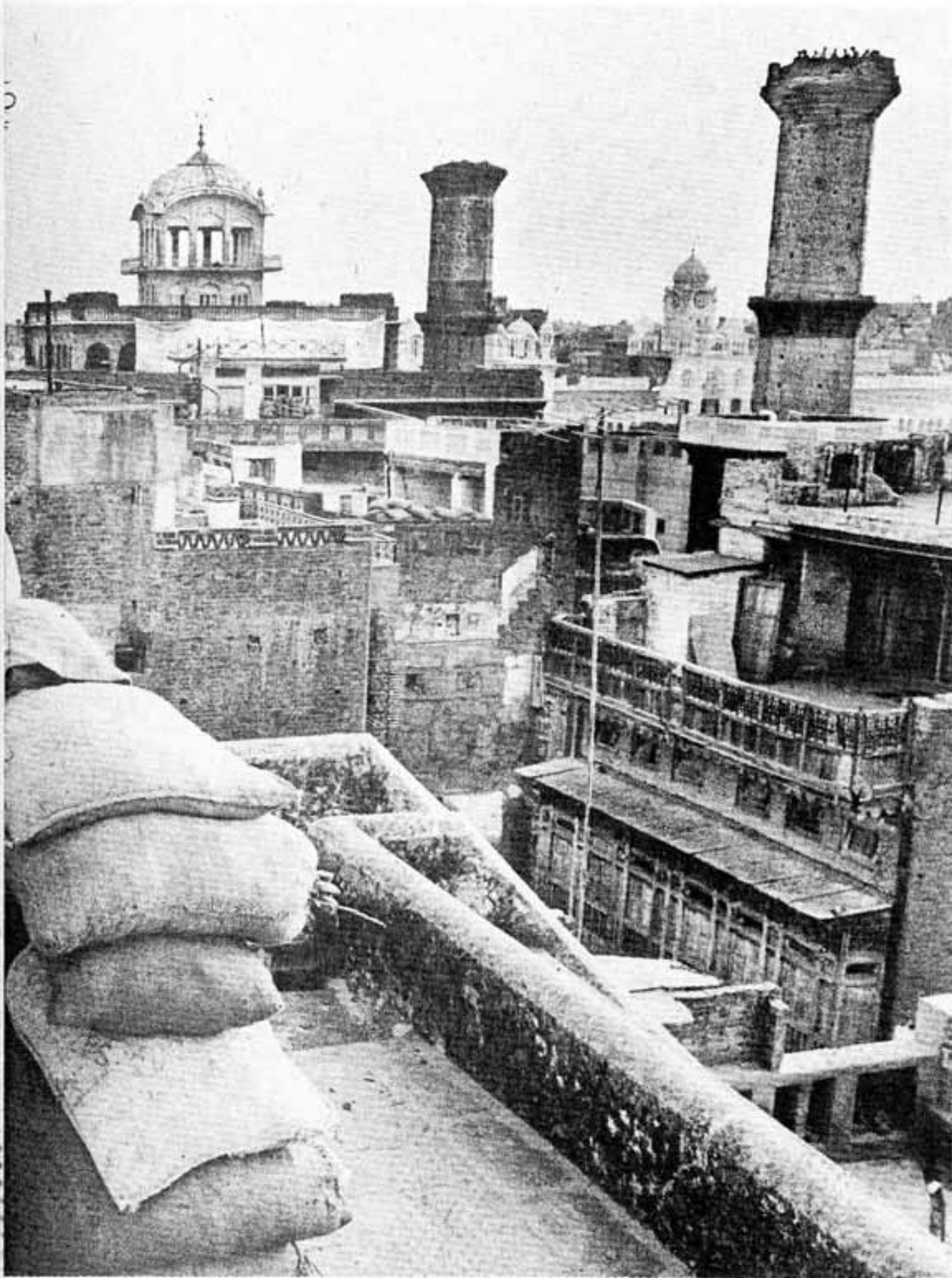
The Biharis decided to set up new positions behind sandbagged windows in vacated houses. Men from the Garhwal Regiment and Brigade of Guards joined in a similar exercise later in the evening on the other sides of the temple. Almost mechanically, patrols went about in a business-like fashion led by officers carrying binoculars, maps and notebooks, setting up machine-gun emplacements, high-perched bivouacs and sealing off the routes of ingress or escape. Simultaneously, tanks rolled into sensitive villages leading patrols assigned the task of preventing communal killings.

The sequence of events

June 3: By late night, the whole state had been tightly secured. While the alert Biharis watched the area around the clock-tower, the main entrance to the temple and Brahm Buta Market—the extremist stronghold facing the entrance to the serai area—the Garhwalis, the Guardsmen and the Punjabis sealed the other escape routes round Chowk Parag Dass, Chhatti Khui, Atta Mandi, Baba Atal and Buddhi Lutt Bazaar. But the intention was not yet to strike—even at this late stage the army had determined it would be a psychological war, hoping that the build-up might soften the extremists' resolve. Officers went on loud-hailers asking them to surrender peacefully and avoid a blood-bath. There was no immediate response, but later the warnings were greeted with automatic fire.

Still operating on the psychological level, the jawans responded with long bursts on extremist battlements to give them a foretaste of what a frontal battle with the army could be like. But this failed to be of any deterrent value. Quick to respond, the extremists made their intentions clear around midnight, lobbing grenades and maintaining a heavy fusillade with medium machine-guns (MMG's)—perched atop the towers and water tank, each capable of firing over 60 rounds per second.

June 4: By the morning, it had dawned on the army brass that they faced a determined insurgent army charged



with religious fervour and not an armed rabble as they were sometimes contemptuously dismissed as. A high-level decision was taken to deal with them "effectively", starting with the visible fortifications in the shape of pillboxes. The army brought in recoilless guns mounted on jeeps firing small but highly penetrative shells.

But if the officers had initially underestimated the fighting resolve of the extremists, they seemed to have miscalculated the strength of concrete in the bunkers and pillboxes as well, and the army soon

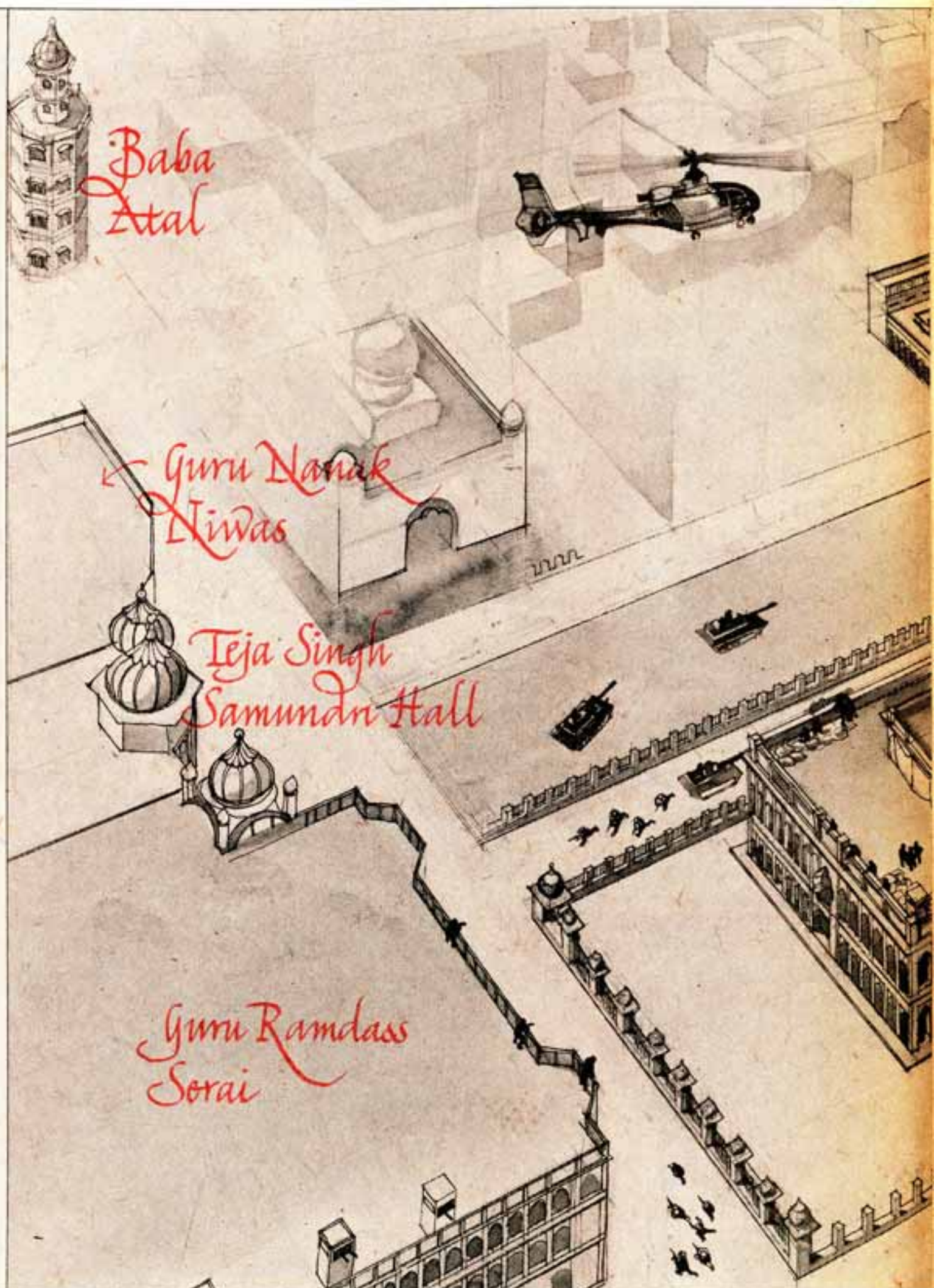
realised it would need to use stronger firepower. They brought in 3.87cm mountain guns, powerful weapons with a short range but deadly accuracy, and the venerable 25-pounders. Recalls an artillery officer: "This indeed was the trickiest part of the operation. The temple is surrounded by extremely tall residential houses that give no clearing for gun emplacements. The temple complex itself is so congested, with the temple buildings completely out of bounds. The wind velocity was heavy and, to hit the pillboxes we had to virtually fire vertically upwards,

knowing fully well that even if there was the slightest miss, or a shell got deflected by wind, it could fall on the temple, or on our own men."

Yet the artillery fire was accurately directed with deadly effect in the early hours of June 4. Eyewitnesses recall how shell after shell hit the pillboxes, blowing them apart bit-by-bit, and bodies flung down by explosions made an eerie sight. The best evidence of the accuracy of the shelling is the massive water tower behind the serais which still stands though with large, gaping holes.

Operation Bluestar

For the first time in 400 years the recital of gurbani was about to stop in the Golden Temple. As dusk fell on June 5, commandos dressed in jet-black dungarees slipped into the temple complex through the road between the serais and the Guru Ramdass langar building. They were able to bring back safely Akali Dal leaders like Harchand Singh Longowal and Gurcharan Singh Tohra along with their key aides living in the Teja Singh Samundari Hall, Guru Ramdass Serai and Guru Nanak Niwas. The darkened sky was lit with bright red tracers and massive columns of smoke billowed from the langar building where heavy fighting took place. Foot-soldiers marching towards the Akal Takht ran into heavy machine-gun barrage from the Harmandir Sahib. Artillery pounded the Akal Takht and the heavily fortified pillboxes on top of the two 18th century towers and the langar building. During the day officers guided the fire from Chetak helicopters. On the evening of June 6 jawans charged the Akal Takht under the cover of armour and subdued the opposition after fierce hand-to-hand fighting. Bhindranwale and his key associates, Amrik Singh and Shahbeg Singh were found dead in the basement of the building. A squadron of tanks and armoured personnel carriers guarded the approaches to the temple, aiming their machine-guns at the parapets. The last to fall was the Harmandir Sahib. On the evening of June 6, 22 terrorists led by the All India Sikh Students Federation General Secretary Harminder Singh Sandhu came out with a white flag. The first phase of Operation Bluestar was over.



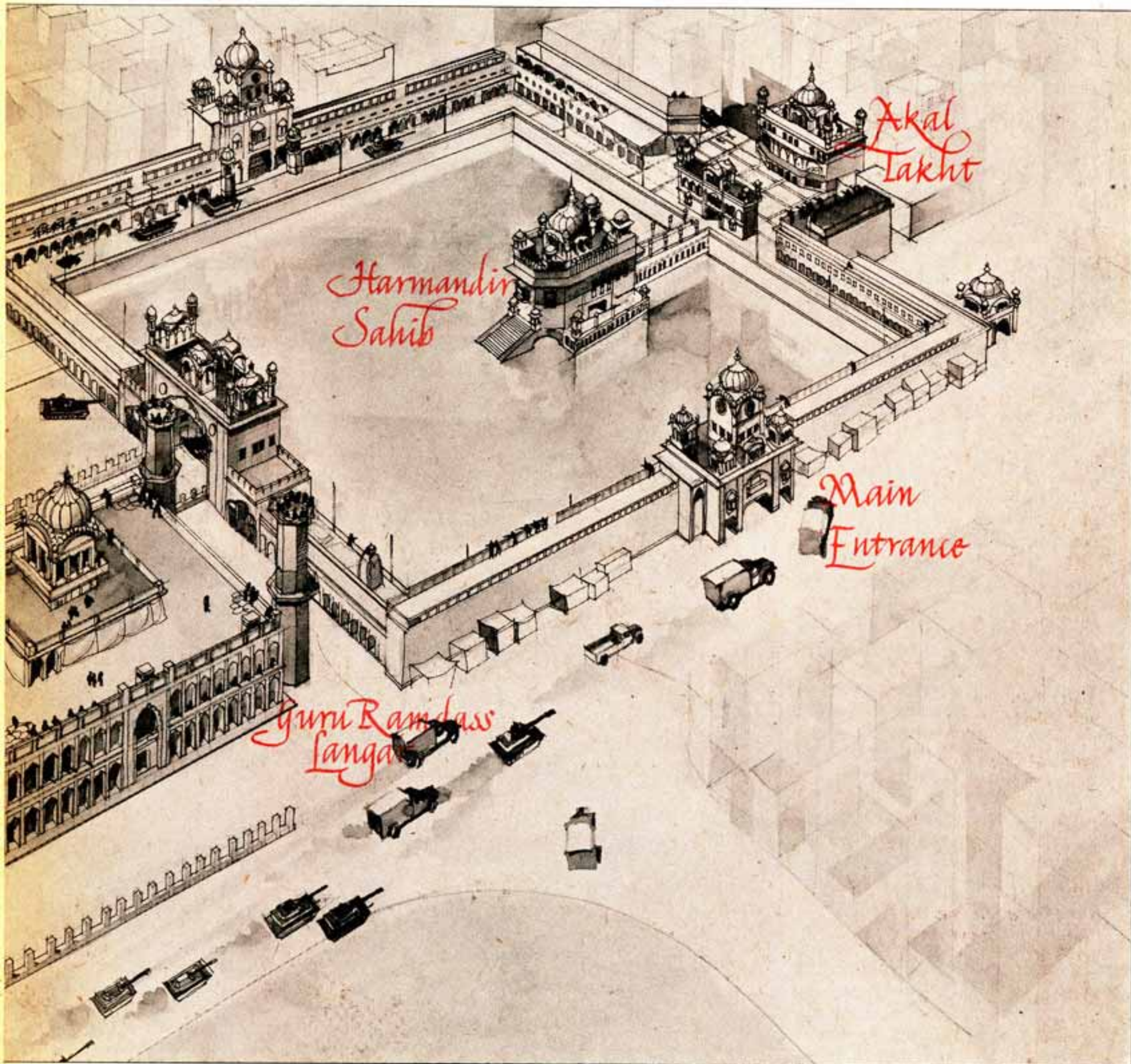
THE MEN of the Babbar Khalsa group, opposed to Bhindranwale but equally zealous in the fight for the temple, had occupied the tank only to be blown to bits. Later the tank was punctured with shells to send the water gushing downwards, causing confusion among the Babbars manning the gun emplacements beneath it.

The jawans had no real reason to be satisfied with the morning's work, which later turned out to be no more than minor surgery, hardly touching the core of the malaise. This became obvious in the af-

ternoon as the extremists opened fire with rocket-propelled grenade launchers (RPG's) and rockets, one of which hit a picket, killing a Bihar Regiment jawan and wounding three. Already quick to adjust their tactics with the discovery of new resolve and firepower in the temple, the generals again changed tactics. This time, they realised that the use of "K" vehicles—as tanks and armoured personnel carriers are called in army parlance—had now become inevitable if the temple was to be taken.

June 5: Army gunners again got

down to the job of softening up the temple defences, with the cannons placed in the historic Jallianwala Bagh close to the serais firing with deadly effect and accuracy. The casualties inside the temple mounted steeply even as the army called in police officers familiar with the area to broadcast appeals for surrender. The artillery kept up an incessant barrage throughout, with officers in two Chetak helicopters hovering over the temple complex, directing the aim of fire. But, again hopes that the demonstration of firepower would soften the defenders' will



were shortlived: the only people to surrender, later that evening, were nearly 200 SGPC employees, their women and children, and some of the labourers employed inside the gurudwara.

THE SIEGE had by now been laid for 60 hours—many more than the planners had anticipated it would take to neutralise the opposition. The generals knew they were running out of time. "Ideally, in such a situation," said an officer, "it would have been useful to continue the siege for a few days more to smoke out at least a part of the opposition. But here we could not afford that luxury." The key constraint was the growing mob violence around Amritsar and in the whole area of Punjab west of the Beas. As word of the siege spread, thousands of people began gathering in hamlets all round Amritsar, trying to converge on the town to "defend the temple". As helicopter-borne reconnaissance patrols scoured the countryside looking for even the smallest accumulation of people, hundreds of wireless sets in the region repeated the alarming message from the police chiefs asking all officers to "shoot at sight anyone seen on the streets and at once fire at the mobs".

But this was unavoidable in view of the mass upsurge that was taking place in the countryside, threatening a communal holocaust. At Golwad village in the Jhubal police station area, barely 25 km from Amritsar, over 30,000 people armed with an assortment of firearms and traditional weapons had gathered under the leadership of Baba Bidhi Chand, a well-known mahant, to march towards Amritsar, vowing to save the temple and kill Hindus. Crowds were also gathering in the same region around Ajnala and even Raja Sansi, close to the Amritsar airport. Tanks had to be sent in to contain these. And to the east, large numbers of people were also gathering round the villages of Dhandkesali, Fatehpur Rajputan and around Batala in the Gurdaspur district.

Though a large crowd assembled at Chowk Mehta, Bhindranwale's original headquarters immediately ran into an army patrol, at the village of Verka, famous for its milk products, the Punjab Armed Police failed to contain a crowd that nearly lynched two constables and took their rifles away. Mercifully, a helicopter patrol spotted the people on the march and immediately vectored on an

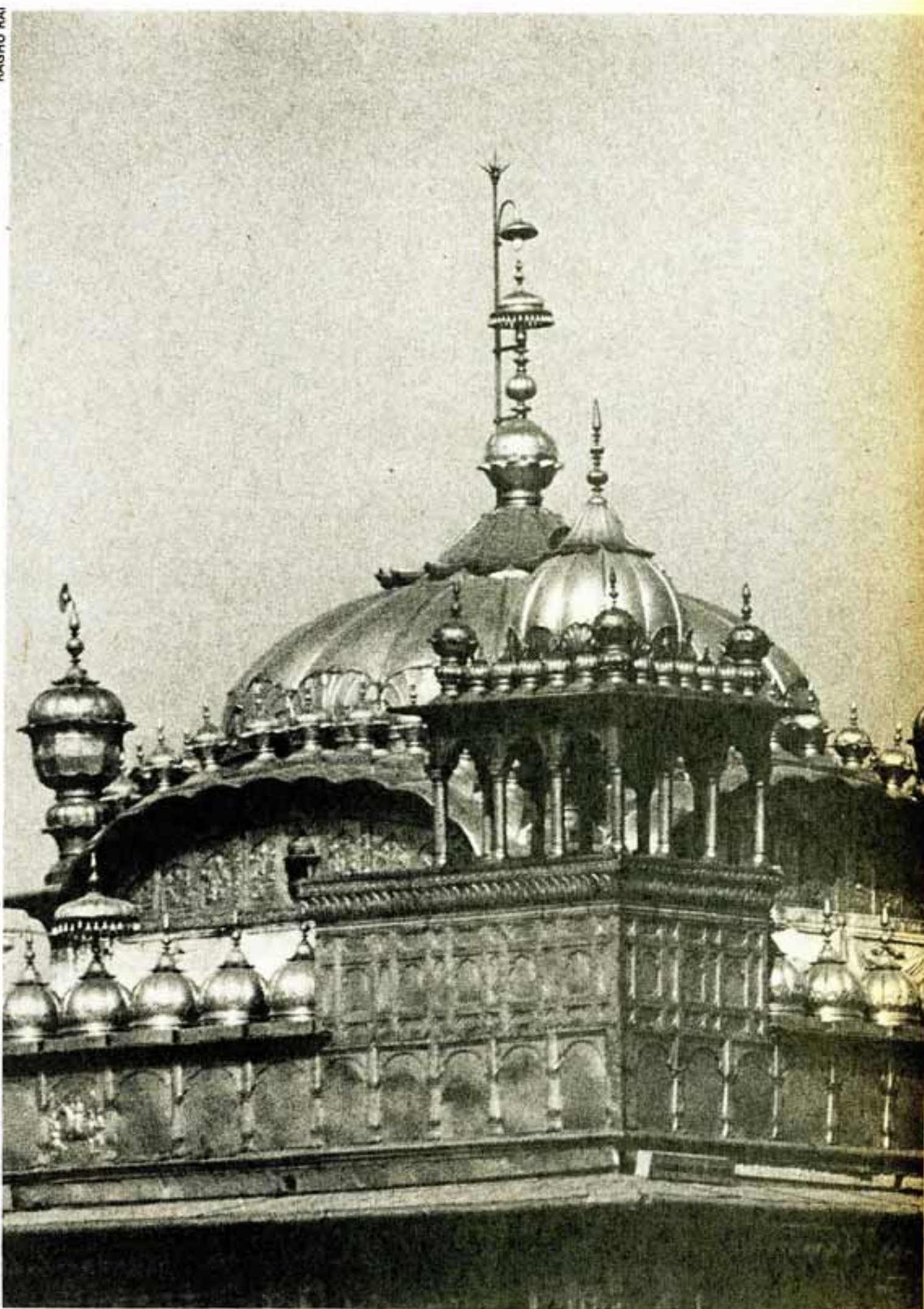
army patrol which prevented possible communal violence.

But the officers leading the operation were not reassured by this. One later explained: "In such a situation the determination of the mobs increases on a cumulative basis. We had no doubt that with the passage of time the mobs would get bigger and angrier, and unless something drastic was done we would have dozens of Jallianwala Baghs around Amritsar alone. It is all very nice to talk in terms of effective, deterrent fire, but there

is a limit to how many people you can kill out of a mob." It was this that prompted the generals to choose what one of them later called the devil's alternative—the storming of the temple complex.

June 5, night: By dusk things had come to a head. As men of the 10 Guards under Lt-Colonel Mohammed Israr, regarded as some of the finest troops in the world and trained specifically for the assault role, prepared for the H-hour, hasty consultations got underway in the serais where moderate Akali leaders like

RAGHU RAI



Extremist fortifications being reinforced on top of the temple towers

Longowal, Tohra and the Dal's official spokesman Balwant Singh Ramoowalia were hiding.

While the guardsmen geared up and the moderates hedged, another group of men was going about preparing for its job with the cool, calculating efficiency of a commando unit. Strapping on bullet-proof jackets, the men made last-minute checks on their very specialised weapons and gear. They were an impressive lot — a hundred lean, wiry men, many of them officers, all in jet-black dungarees. For

the first time in the history of the Indian Army, one of its youngest units, the Commandos, was preparing to go into action. As darkness engulfed the complex, 40 commandos, carrying sleek American 5.56 mm rifles mounted with menacingly large bayonets, as well as Bren-guns with telescopic sights slipped into the serais on a mission that could mean death for each of them.

Their brief was clear — to bring out the moderates safely. While other units gave covering fire, they cut off the serais

from the temple area, braving fire from all sides, to ensure the safe escape of the moderates. In the process, they suffered heavy casualties: of the 40 who went in, three were killed and 19 wounded despite their bullet-proof jackets. "This was a fiery baptism, we didn't do badly," recalled one commando later.

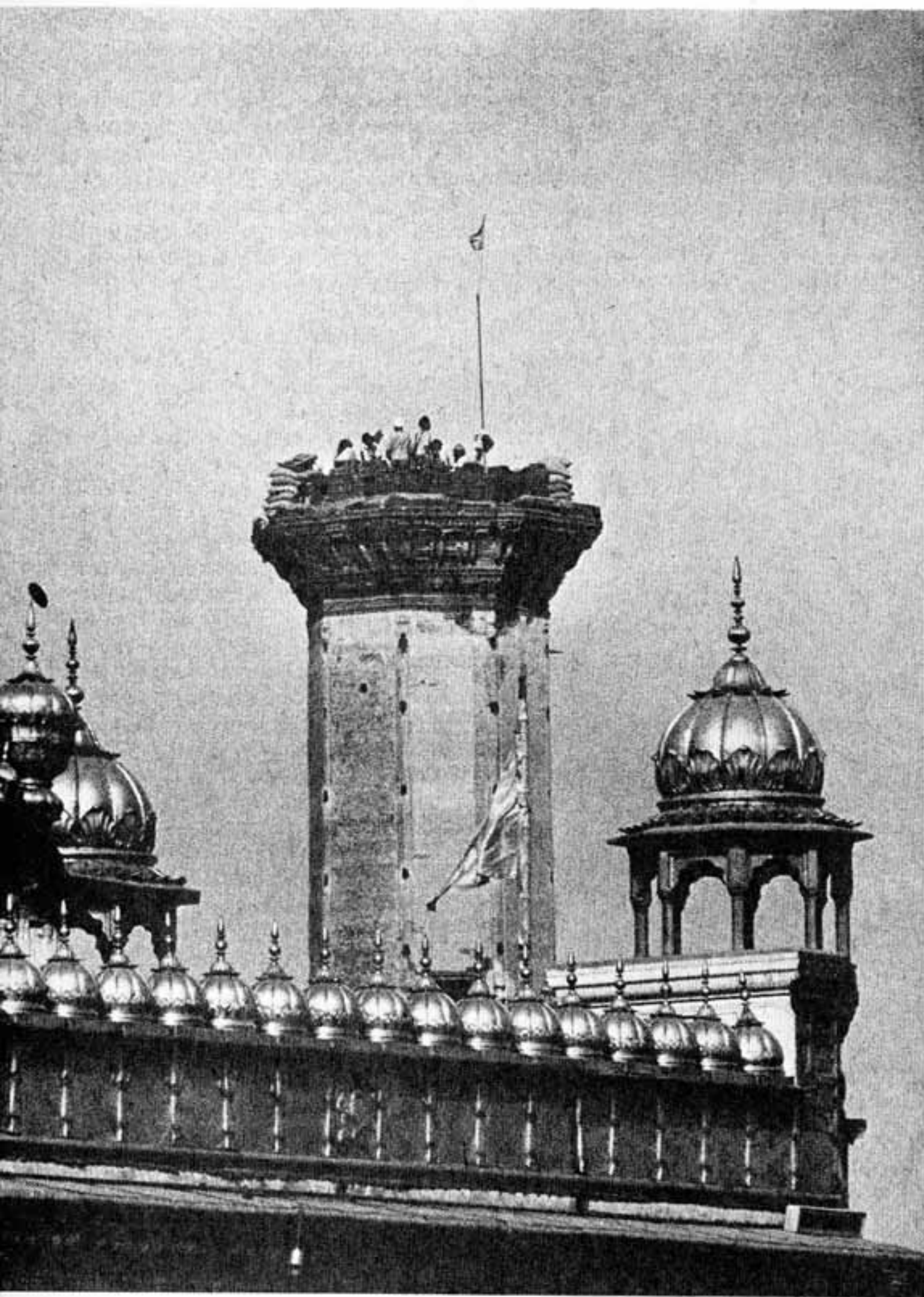
They had managed, around midnight to extricate Longowal, Tohra, Ramoowalia, Akhand Kirtani Jatha chief Bibi Amarjit Kaur and others including senior SGPC officials. But extremist marksmen got two of their prize quarries — former Akali Dal secretary Gurcharan Singh whom Bhindranwale had accused of plotting to kill his close associate Surinder Singh Sodhi, as well as the colourful SGPC member Bagga Singh, who had made no bones about his contempt for Bhindranwale.

WHILE the authorities whisked away the Akali leaders to the Raja Sansi contonment, the Commandos' job was far from over. They were now supposed to lead other assault groups into the temple complex. So they slipped in again, in larger numbers this time. Splitting up into small bands, they made suicidal raids on LMG emplacements, trying to clear the passage for the main body of troops and cut off extremists positioned in various parts of the temple complex from each other, suffering heavy casualties but maintaining their tenuous hold nevertheless. It was then the turn of the infantrymen.

The first assault was concentrated on the road separating the serais from the temple complex (*see sketch*) and cut off the defenders vertically. There was bloody, expensive close quarter battle before the serais as defenders' machine-guns fired from all directions and the jawans had to fight pitched battles, often hand-to-hand, to clear each emplacement. For all practical purposes, this meant each of the scores of balconies and rooms facing the road. As the battle for the serais intensified, battle cries were heard elsewhere too.

Infantrymen charged in from the other, narrower roads, making for the langar building, the Akal Takht and numerous extremist positions all over the marbled, colonnaded *parikrama* round the temple, which the faithful must walk barefooted to reach the Akal Takht and the sanctum sanctorum.

In normal times the *parikrama* is awash with devout volunteers carrying buckets to cool and clean the exquisite marble structure. But this evening, the



marble was destined to be turned into a gory mosaic of red and olive green as jawans, caught on a flat surface with no cover fell to the massive barrage of machine-gun fire. Under orders not to fire even a single shot at the Golden Temple, they were caught in the middle with MMG's firing from the "out of bounds" temple and the Akal Takht building. Strategically placed in a straight line with the temple, this became more or less unapproachable. In repeated charges, the infantrymen tried to reach the building from the flanks but the barrage of fire was impossible to penetrate. "Every inch of the place was absolutely covered with machine-gun fire," recalls an infantry officer. "So heavy was the concentration of fire that, even in a regular war between two countries' armies, officers would never have allowed troops to peep out of the trenches. A frontal assault would have been a military absurdity," he added.

But these were unusual times and as casualties mounted, new units were pushed in. These were the Guards, Madras, Garhwalis, Dogras and the Punjabis. Over a hundred were hit even in the initial stages of the assault. Says an officer: "It was so utterly frustrating for the jawans who saw their comrades die under fire from the temple and yet could not shoot back. Frankly even we never thought our men could have shown so much patience." At another, higher level, however, people were running out of patience and time. The commanders now decided on harsher methods, the use of armour.

Breaking their way in from the side of the serais, tanks and wheeled armoured personnel carriers rumbled on to the *parikrama*, their machine-guns blazing and jawans following. The cover of armour brought down the casualty rate steeply, but there still was no breakthrough. Meanwhile the troops had, on the other side, virtually neutralised the serais, and much of the resistance from the Guru Ramdass langar building ended as it caught fire under heavy shelling. Carrying shoulder-fired Carl Gustav guns and grenade-launchers, jawans went from terrace to terrace, clearing out

resistance. Dawn saw the sun rise on a stalemate, the terrorists holed up in the Akal Takht and Harmandir Sahib, and the army everywhere else.

June 6: When the curfew was relaxed for two hours in the afternoon, this stalemate still prevailed and the extremists remained in firm control of the temple and Akal Takht even as the army picked up its own and the extremists' dead and wounded from the other areas. Any approach towards the Akal Takht was still suicidal. Meanwhile, the extremists had unsheathed yet another surprise weapon in their armoury—a shoulder-fired anti-tank missile launcher that damaged one of the armoured personnel carriers. The troops relaxed and waited for night and the *coup de grace*.

Towards the evening, however, a decision had been taken to overcome the Akal Takht defences by using artillery

Extremist arms, including grenades, Sten-guns, LMG's and ammunition recovered from the complex



fire and, for the first time, even the tanks' main cannons were used, though sparingly, to bring down the outer facade, pillars and canopy of the building. Amritsar was to remain awake for yet another night with the incessant roar of cannon-fire.

Accounts of what happened on the night of June 6 are still imprecise about the exact sequence of events, and it is impossible to say for sure when the resistance capitulated. But, apparently sometime in the course of the night Bhindranwale, along with key lieutenants Shahbeg Singh, a sacked major-general of the Indian Army, and Amrik Singh, president of the All India Sikh Students Federation (AISSF) decided to fight the last battle from the Akal Takht basement (Ghura Sahib), after most of his die-hard defenders had fallen. When the jawans overpowered a machine-gun nest by throwing grenades on the ground floor, one of the shell splinters hit Bhindranwale in the face. And as he desperately tried to take cover elsewhere, he was caught in bursts of Sten-gun fire.

There was an element of irony in the way the end came for Bhindranwale who, to twist a metaphor, had always lived by the Sten-gun, his weapon of preference. With his death ended a legend—of a most wantonly cruel scourge for some, of a soldier-saint for some others. But keeping him company even in death were Shahbeg Singh and Amrik Singh, the key personae in the three-year drama of blood and gore. Only a few years younger than Bhindranwale, Amrik Singh had fought to the end, setting at rest the rumours of his clash with his mentor. Bhindranwale had, in a complicated process of succession, taken over the mantle of the chief of the *Damdami Taksal*, a renowned Sikh seminary from Amrik's father, Sant Kartar Singh Bhindranwale.

But while Amrik Singh's dedication could be attributed to old loyalty and religious fervour, what led Shahbeg Singh to gang up with Bhindranwale? A celebrated guerrilla warfare expert of the army Shahbeg had, as a brigadier, trained the Mukti Bahini during the 1971 Bangladesh

"We had no other choice"

DESPITE the unexpectedly strong resistance from the extremists in the Golden Temple, the military commanders in charge of Operation Bluestar made every effort to keep the media informed of the progress of their efforts to secure the temple complex in their daily press briefings. Though security restrictions obviously limited the extent of the information they parted with, the three commanders, Lt-General K. Sundarji, Lt-General Ranjit Singh Dayal and Major-General R.K. Gaur were surprisingly candid when Chandigarh Correspondent GOBIND THUKRAL interviewed them jointly in the immediate wake of the operation. Excerpts:

R.D. SHARMA



(From left) Generals Dayal, Gaur and Sundarji: "we suffered"

Q. Would you justify the involvement of the armed forces in civil strife? Shouldn't it have been left to the politicians and the police to tackle the situation?

A. There's nothing wrong in the army coming to the aid of the civil authority. Sometimes the situation demands it... the political executive feels the need of army help. I think it should be forthcoming without any reservation. Moreover, when a country's security is threatened by a civil disturbance, the armed forces are duty-bound to answer any call.

Q. What exactly was the task assigned to the military in Punjab?

A. We were called for a specific mission—to root out terrorism. Religious places were being misused. These were command posts for terrorists. Harmandir Sahib, the sanctum sanctorum of the Sikhs, was the bastion of terrorists. A God-fearing and honest community that has often brought glory to the country was getting a bad name. Our job was to clear the place of terrorists and wipe them out of their other hide-outs, too.

Q. Have you accomplished this task?

A. The first phase is over. We have cleared all the religious places of these anti-national elements. We raided 38 gurudwaras, five Hindu temples and one mosque. Over 250 terrorists, inclu-

ding their source of inspiration Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale were killed, another 50 wounded and over 450 captured. We seized a large quantity of weapons including medium and light machine-guns, rocket launchers, rifles Sten-guns and a large quantity of ammunition and hand grenades. I must

say they were well prepared and trained.

Q. How difficult was this task?

A. It was a very sensitive task. Rightly, religious sentiments of the Sikhs were involved. Believe me, we went into the Golden Temple complex with humility in our hearts and prayers on our lips.... We took this decision not in anger, but in sadness. We suffered many more dead and wounded than is normal in such engagements. We lost one officer and 47 jawans, a dozen are missing and over 100 were wounded.

Q. How was the operation conducted?

A. We were very careful on two counts. First; to cause less bloodshed since these were our own misguided countrymen, and second, to cause least damage to the complex. At first we used light calibre weapons, and even those after giving enough warning. We were called in on June 3 and were around the complex. We did not enter till June 5 evening. Once inside, we again allowed them more time. Some 500 people came out—these included terrorists as well as pilgrims. They were taken to safe places. Even SGPC chief G.S. Tohra and Akali Dal President H.S. Longowal were taken to proper places. Time was allowed to other gurudwaras, too. Only

when we were sure that our appeals were not heeded, we opened fire. Since the other side resorted to heavy LMG and MMG fire, including rockets, we had to make a befitting reply. Tanks too were pressed into service. Our job was not only to see how our men reacted to the entry into the holy places of worship, but to be careful of public reaction, too.

Q. What kind of force was used?

A. We had, out of the six commanders who entered the complex, four Sikhs, one Hindu and one Muslim. No one resented it and each did an honourable job. It was the other side that was desecrating the holy temple and killing innocent people. Tell me, which religion preaches this?

Q. How did the other side conduct itself?

A. They were well equipped. The Akal Takht was very well fortified with sand bags. All the three floors were turned into command posts. The whole night long there was fierce fighting. We had to use rockets and MMG's to wipe out the terrorists there. In fact, we spared the Harmandir Sahib at great cost to ourselves. Over four score terrorists kept firing from there for more than 24 hours. We suffered, but saved the building.

Q. The state-wide curfew, censorship, and blockage of transport and communication hasn't happened before even in times of war. Wasn't this like semi-martial law?

A. We had the information that thousands of Sikhs were likely to reach Amritsar once the news of the army crackdown spread. We stopped all movement on roads, imposed curfew in all towns, and since the newspapers would have helped spread all kinds of stories, the operation would have been very difficult. Communal feelings were also likely to be roused through the media. That's why we recommended a total ban on newspapers. We are against any control over the freedom of the press, but times like this require a little more caution. We will lift the ban the moment the operations are over.

Q. Because of this there was a lot of misinformation and rumours around. Wasn't that harmful, too?

A. We had no other choice.

campaign. Lt-General Jagjit Singh Aurora, who was his immediate boss as army commander, remembers him as someone "rather good at his job". Says he: "He used to trim his hair though he wore a turban. With the Mukti Bahini, he wore lungis and balaclava caps. I must say he played the part."

Originally a Gurkha Regiment officer, Shahbeg had served with the Parachute Brigade and later the Punjab Regiment too and, as major-general, commanded the Madhya Pradesh area from Jabalpur. It was here that he was charged with corruption and told to leave after a CBI inquiry. Two months ago he had told INDIA TODAY: "I am an old sick man with no interest in fighting. But I would be a liar if I said I am not frustrated and angry. In the army I was done in. But I am not as much of a guerrilla leader here as people believe."

Army sources, however, say that he was indeed responsible for the tremendously effective, fortress-like defence of the temple. The army later had more surprises. Shahbeg's young daughter as well as Amrik Singh's wife were caught manning LMG nests.

But the last citadel to fall was the temple from where terrorists, led by the AISSF General Secretary Harminder Singh

Sandhu continued to fire. Barred from firing at the temple, the jawans tried once to physically overpower the terrorists by rushing across the bridge barefoot. Many were felled by a hail of bullets and the attempt was given up. When even the frogmen failed to break in, the army decided to sit it out for as long as necessary.

EVEN with the leaders accounted for, and the main battle over, resistance continued and, initially, the army suffered heavily as die-hards hiding in the maze of basements and tunnels under the temple complex kept on emerging from manholes to lob grenades or take pot-shots at armymen. It was in one of these sniper raids that the 10th battalion of the Dogra Regiment lost three officers. The extremists, living on generous supplies of roasted gram and *shakarpara* stored at various strategic points underground, even managed to abduct an Army Medical Corps doctor, a captain, his compounder and two jawans.

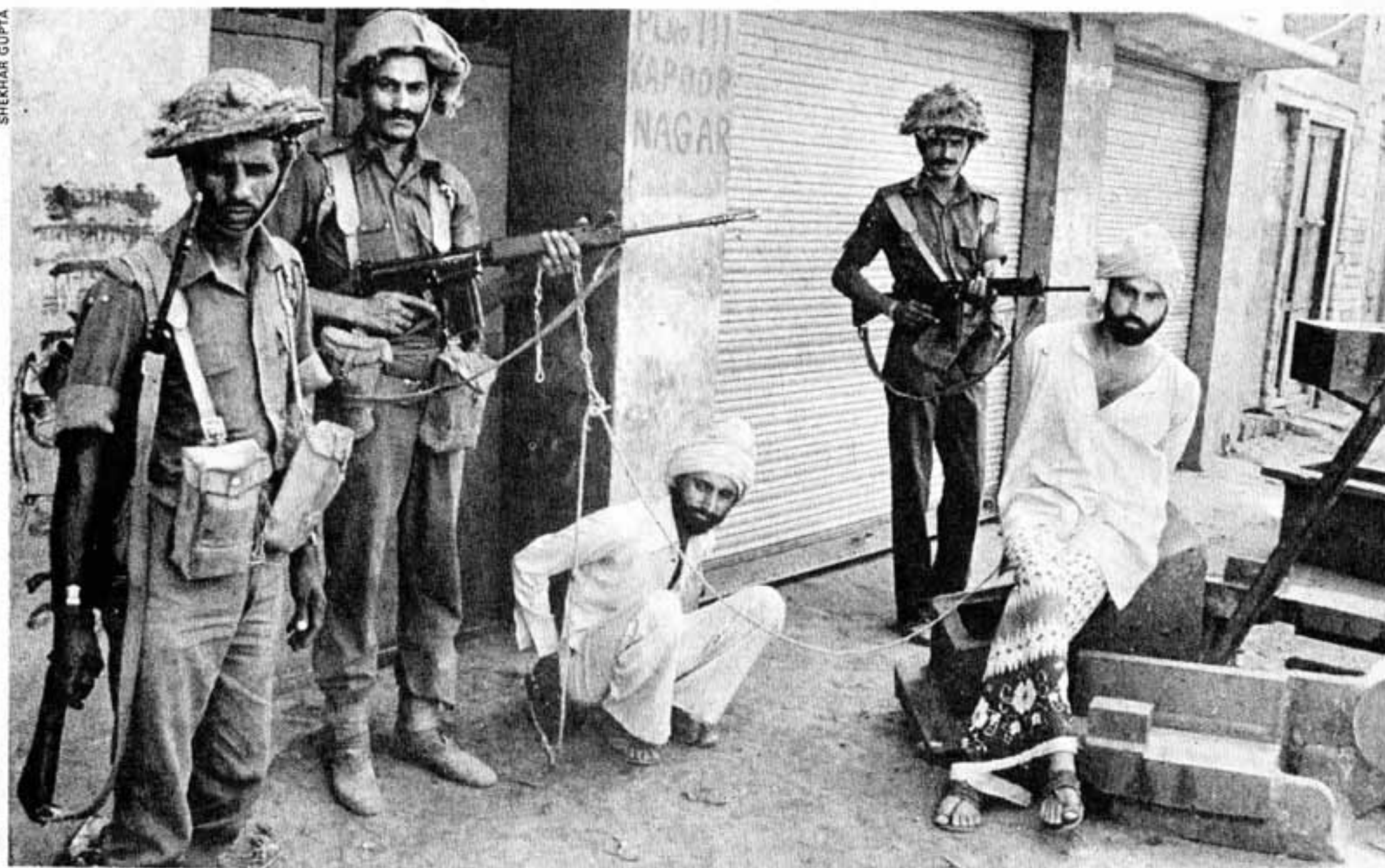
The army later traced the basement where the men had been dragged and slaughtered, and cleared it after heavy shelling. It was now yet again the turn of the commandos to wage a long hide-and-

seek battle with the terrorists in tunnels and basements. Sniping continued for almost a week and the terrorists showed up most devastatingly as President Zail Singh visited the temple. Snipers opened fire and hit the commandant of the Commando battalion standing just a few yards away from him. Zail Singh (*see box*) smiled wryly as the commandos' colonel saw a bullet slip off his bullet-proof jacket and go clean through his upper arm, and kept walking coolly till the end of the *parikrama*.

While the Golden Temple complex was taken, the army had also gone into action, raiding over 40 places of worship—including five temples and a mosque—all over the state. Except at Tarn Taran gurudwara where five army men and the same number of extremists were killed and the Dukh Niwaran gurudwara in Patiala and a gurudwara at Moga, this hunt yielded very little. The army was now in the process of moving over to the countryside for a counter-insurgency operation of a more classic nature.

However, considering the enormous scope of Operation Bluestar and the sensitive nature of its target, it is obvious that many aspects of the operation will remain in the grey area between fact and supposition. Government sources have claimed

Suspected extremists being rounded up



SHEKHAR GUPTA

that between 300 and 400 terrorists and 90-odd army men were killed inside the temple complex. According to army sources involved in the operation, the casualty figure is much higher on both sides. By the evening of June 9, over 750 inquest reports had been prepared on the extremist dead alone, and many bodies still awaited clearance. It would be safe to assume that close to 1,000 extremists were killed, while army sources admit that their own dead could be as high as 200 or more.

The army and the security agencies are now analysing their own failings in the aftermath of the operations. The President, for example, raised a very significant question by asking Governor B.D. Pande and Inspector General of Police P.S. Bhindar what the police and intelligence agencies were doing while thousands of weapons were smuggled into the temple. "It seems you had given your eyes and ears on loan to somebody," he said angrily. The intelligence agencies had also failed to establish the terrorists' foreign link by the capture of Chinese, American and Pakistani weapons, Pakistani passports and men.

And, if it was the time for the intelligence agencies to do some soul-searching, the generals were still reflecting on the experiences of the onerous task assigned to

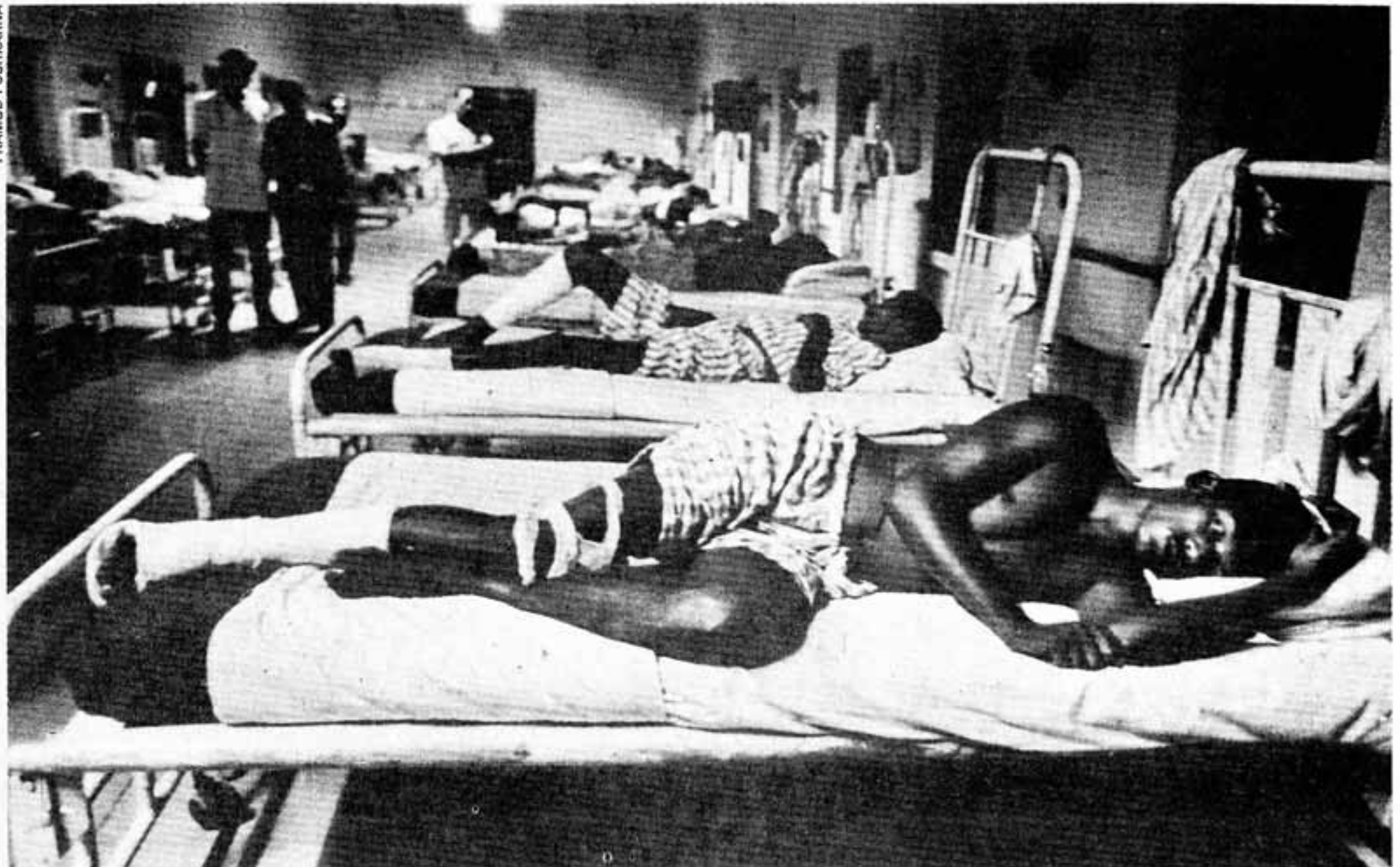
them. Said Lt-General Krishnaswamy Sundarji, GOC-in-C, Western Command: "We went inside with humility in our hearts and prayers on our lips." Added his deputy, Dayal: "We in the army hold all places of religion in equal reverence." The army had played its part living up to its secular traditions. The three key generals planning the operations were Sikhs, so were four of the six battalion commanders participating in the action, and the troops too had a fair sprinkling of Sikhs. Yet the army brass was now worried by the wave of desertions in some of the Sikh units. The generals say it is very insignificant, a passing phase. Said one: "Some of this had been anticipated. But the cost-benefit ratio still worked out favourably. Let's face it, what we fought in Amritsar was not a battle against a stray bunch of hoodlums. It was war against Khalistan."

IN A LONG-term perspective, however, the war had barely begun. The success of Operation Bluestar depends largely on the all-crucial second phase of the blueprint. With Bhindranwale and his key lieutenants exterminated, it is clear that the back of the extre-

mist movement has been broken. Without a charismatic leader to inspire them, the remaining extremists hiding in the countryside within and outside Punjab have little scope for major mischief. The second phase calls for the army to remain in Punjab till all evidence of extremist presence is eliminated, while a parallel political campaign is launched to restore the state to normalcy and search quickly for a political solution.

But the danger now lies outside the country as well. The more sophisticated weaponry found inside the temple clearly indicates that outside elements were involved. Most of the heavier weapons bore Pakistan or Chinese markings. The Government has made it quite clear that it suspects Pakistan, but that attitude has now become a case of crying wolf so it is likely to hold little water. The presence of at least two circumcised Nihangs among those killed at the temple would lend some credence to the allegation. Already, in London's Bayswater Road, self-styled Khalistan leader Jagjit Singh Chauhan has set up Khalistan House, the seat of his so-called government in exile. The threat from him and his followers has been dismissed lightly by the Indian Government but there is a real danger of the fringe elements in his following taking to

Injured jawans in a hospital in Ambala



PRAMOD PUSHKARNA

terrorist activity against the more vulnerable Indian-related targets outside India. If they adopt the kind of tactics and fanaticism that European terrorist groups did, the Government will find itself in a tight spot.

As the reactions among the Sikhs showed, a lot of political and emotional groundwork still remains to be done to convince them that the army had not inflicted a crushing defeat on their community but only cleared their own holy shrine of people who were as much a threat to them as to the rest of the country. Nothing characterised this distrust better than the sudden discord in some of the Sikh units of the army as wild rumours spread.

It began at Sriganganagar, a border town in Rajasthan where over 400 jawans of 9 Sikh Light Infantry rebelled, only to be subdued later after a series of skirmishes. This was followed by the most serious of the mutinies at Ramgarh near Ranchi in Bihar where, charged by the rumours that their women were being raped by the army in Punjab, 1,438 recruits

revolted, killing Brigadier R.C. Puri, the regimental centre commandant, wounded three other officers and escaped with weapons, to surrender after bloody gunbattles with army men in five different places in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. Similar desertions took place in Pune, Thane, Jammu, Siliguri, Silchar and Alwar. Army spokesmen, however, called these "insignificant".

Tragically, the desertions were a direct result of the wild rumours that were flying around after the siege took place. With the press gagged, the only source of information was All India Radio and Doordarshan, both badly lacking in credibility. But whatever the Government's wisdom in clamping a media black-out resulting in the dangerous rumour-mongering, it made full use of television to try and convince the Sikhs at least that the Harmandir Sahib, the sanctum sanctorum of the Golden Temple, was undamaged and the holy relics including the Guru Granth Sahib, the holy scripture of the Sikhs, intact.

But simple jawans fired by rumours

in far away cantonments can hardly be blamed for rebelling when adverse reactions came from even people who constitute the *cognoscenti* among the Sikhs. The most surprising example was of Khushwant Singh, a bitter critic of Bhindranwale, his style of politics and his Khalistan demand. Speaking to INDIA TODAY after returning his Padma Bhushan he said: "My main objection is that the Government allowed the situation to build up, allowed them to take arms in and out when every gate had an armed post. What were they doing? They can't get away saying there was no alternative; why was it allowed to reach this point?"

SIMILAR objections came in from Lt-General Aurora who too has been leading a campaign in favour of the Akali moderates to isolate Bhindranwale. Says he: "Even if Bhindranwale was a rebel and a rabble-rouser, the effort should have been to isolate him and strengthen the moderates who are patriotic people. But just the reverse has been done. The consequence is that now every

THE PRESIDENT

Dignified Demeanour

THE PRESIDENT of India is not usually involved in the day-to-day affairs of the country. But last fortnight Giani Zail Singh, the country's first Sikh head of state, found himself right in the heart of the Punjab crisis. Departing from convention, the President flew into trouble-torn Amritsar in a chartered Indian Airlines

Boeing, and even in Delhi kept in touch with the latest developments on the crack-down on terrorists. Zail Singh was in something of a predicament: as a devout Sikh, he was understandably concerned about the wild rumours about army action in the Golden Temple but as the President he was equally concerned with a solution

which would restore communal harmony in Punjab.

In the temple complex, bullet holes pock-marked the walls of the Akal Takht, the seat of temporal power of the Sikh religion, when the President's entourage solemnly marched its way down the hall. Visibly shaken by the spectacle of devastation and the smell of death all around, the President, barefoot and looking forlorn, offered his prayers to the Granth Sahib (the holy Sikh scripture) draped in white linen and kept on a pedestal at the Harmandir Sahib.

The presidential visit acquired an eerie poignancy with the presence of fire-tenders close by the temple complex, the maintenance squad washing off fresh bloodstains from the floor and the walls, and the conservancy staff clearing away the rubble of a three-day siege. The high-profile visit, in which Zail Singh was accompanied by Special Assistant to the Prime Minister R.K. Dhawan and Rajiv Gandhi's influential confidant Arun Singh, operated at two levels. At one, it was an anguished journey of an individual to the scene of a gruesome yet avoidable tragedy involving his faith. At the other, it was an eminently successful anodyne to assua-



Zail Singh making traditional cash offering during his visit to the temple

Sikh protesters outside the Indian High Commission in London

Sikh feels that he is a suspect in the eyes of the country unless proved otherwise. I totally deprecate the action. I think it is a terrible thing to happen. In what way has it improved the situation?"

This view found support even among some non-Sikhs. Said former Union cabinet secretary Nirmal Kumar Mukerjee: "I think the Sikhs, to a man, will feel that the community has been given a tight slap across the face. What we have, as a result, is an alienated solid Sikh sub-nationality. I am afraid this may give fillip to the Khalistan demand. Bhindranwale dead may be a lot more trouble than Bhindranwale alive."

From the Government's point of view the raid had become the last resort after repeated rounds of talks with the Akalis failed to come up with a solution. Said Union Home Secretary M.M.K. Wali: "Of late, the killings were becoming completely wanton and senseless. Moreover, we had evidence that the ex-

RAMESH SHARMA



tremists were threatening and influencing the Government functionaries, including the judiciary. Moreover, there was every possibility of the Akali morcha beginning on June 3 turning violent." Government spokesmen also argue that those Sikh in-

tellectuals and moderate leaders who now accuse the army of having desecrated the temple could themselves have done something substantial earlier to prevent it becoming a terrorist hide-out. Said a senior bureaucrat: "The moderate leaders and

ge the hurt feelings of the world's 15 million Sikhs. Said Sardar Gurbux Singh, vice-chancellor of Delhi University: "The President's visit to the Golden Temple provided a healing touch. The Sikh community needed it badly."

The indignant pressure on him was compounded by the covert propaganda of his detractors, both within the Congress(I) and the Sikh community, that he was indeed guilty of connivance. Their argument was that as the Supreme Commander of the armed forces, Zail Singh had to bear the sole responsibility for the army's action inside and around the temple.

Oblivious of the President's status as a mere titular head, there were many in the community who would have bought this argument. But Zail Singh conducted himself with exemplary discretion, at once owning the responsibility for and distancing himself from the gory incident. On June 7, the day the security forces took control of the Golden Temple, he made himself unavailable for the national film award function at the capital's Vigyan Bhavan. Later, he cancelled all his public engagements outside the Rashtrapati Bhavan.

In his official residence, meanwhile, the President received a flurry of visitors. On May 30, barely three days before the army action had begun, Mrs

Gandhi spent two tense hours with him, discussing, according to a Rashtrapati Bhavan source, "the entire gamut of options". Rajiv followed suit, meeting him twice before the action. Perhaps the most significant meeting that Zail Singh had in that spell was with K.P. Singh Deo, the minister of state for defence, on June 4, the day after the siege had begun. Before his visit to Amritsar, he had also had a secret 90-minute audience with Arun Singh, who had earlier flown in an Indian Air Force aircraft with Singh Deo to fetch photographs of the curfew-locked city for the President's eyes only. Both Rajiv and Mrs Gandhi repeated their visits to him after the action.

What transpired in his talks with the Prime Minister after the incident will perhaps never be known to the public. But Zail Singh evidently expressed his concern for the delay in completing the operation. Before a group of army officers, he scolded the Punjab Governor, B.D. Pandey, and other state officials for going wrong in their estimates of arms and ammunition inside the temple. "To whom did you mortgage your eyes and ears all these days?" he is said to have asked.

There are portents that his delicate balancing act will come to an end. He was never quite averse to strong action against the terrorists, but always desi-

red the opening of fire to be preceded by gestures of political settlement—the moves of magnanimity that could have taken the rancour from the military strike. But that was not to be.

Seemingly aware of his crucial role, Zail Singh refused to buckle under the pressure of a microscopic minority who wanted his resignation. Instead he advised his followers both inside and outside the country to condemn the misuse of religious places and appealed to them to work for communal harmony. It was on his advice that Doordarshan approached Akal Takht chief priest Kirpal Singh for an interview. According to Rashtrapati Bhavan sources, he was instrumental in getting the Information and Broadcasting Ministry to send the latest photographs of the Golden Temple all over the world to counter the propaganda of the communalists.

Though Zail Singh upheld the Government's action, he also advised the prime minister to find a lasting political solution. The President has also reportedly reiterated that moderates like Parkash Singh Badal and H.S. Longowal should be politically strengthened so that they could carry the Sikh masses with them. But with one tragic chapter freshly closed, the nation waits in fear and hope for the next to open.

—PRABHU CHAWLA

the SGPC have proved to be absolutely ineffective in safeguarding the sanctity of their own shrines. What the army did was only an effort to throw out those indulging in sacrilege."

Among the people who justify the army actions is Lt-General S.K. Sinha, the former vice-chief of the army staff. Says he: "It is a matter of regret that the army had to enter the Golden Temple, but there were no options left. After all, commandos were forced to enter Mecca to flush out terrorists. Here in India, the head priest of the Vishvanath Temple had to be arrested from inside the temple. It is a tragic example of poor intelligence that they were not aware of the arms build-up inside the temple." But he too feels that the Government followed a policy of "drift and indecision for far too long".

THERE is certainly no faulting the army for having carried out its operation, and the Government for having at last gathered the political will to act decisively on Punjab. But the Government has been blamed with not only not strengthening the moderates, but trying to tar them all with the same brush, resulting in the present situation where there is no prominent Sikh leader it can talk to; no one who they believe can command the respect of the entire community. Whatever hopes remained were dashed last fortnight as former chief minister Parkash Singh Badal and former Union agriculture minister Surjit Singh Barnala were arrested in Chandigarh under the National Security Act.

True, Barnala had made some angry statements, but he was badly heckled by hotheads among his own supporters as he tried to stop them raising pro-Khalistan slogans at a gurudwara congregation. Said Badal, in a voice choked with anguish: "The feeling of alienation among the Sikhs has now become powerful. Wittingly or unwittingly, Mrs Gandhi has laid the foundation of Khalistan." Similar reactions came from Sikhs all over the country.

A surprisingly candid reaction, on the other hand, came from the aged Bhai Man Singh, the head *granthi* of the historic Patna Sahib gurudwara. He said: "My main job is to recite the Guru Granth Sahib and I do not know very much about Punjab politics. The army or police should not enter holy shrines as this spoils their sanctity. But if they had to, who was responsible for this? It was

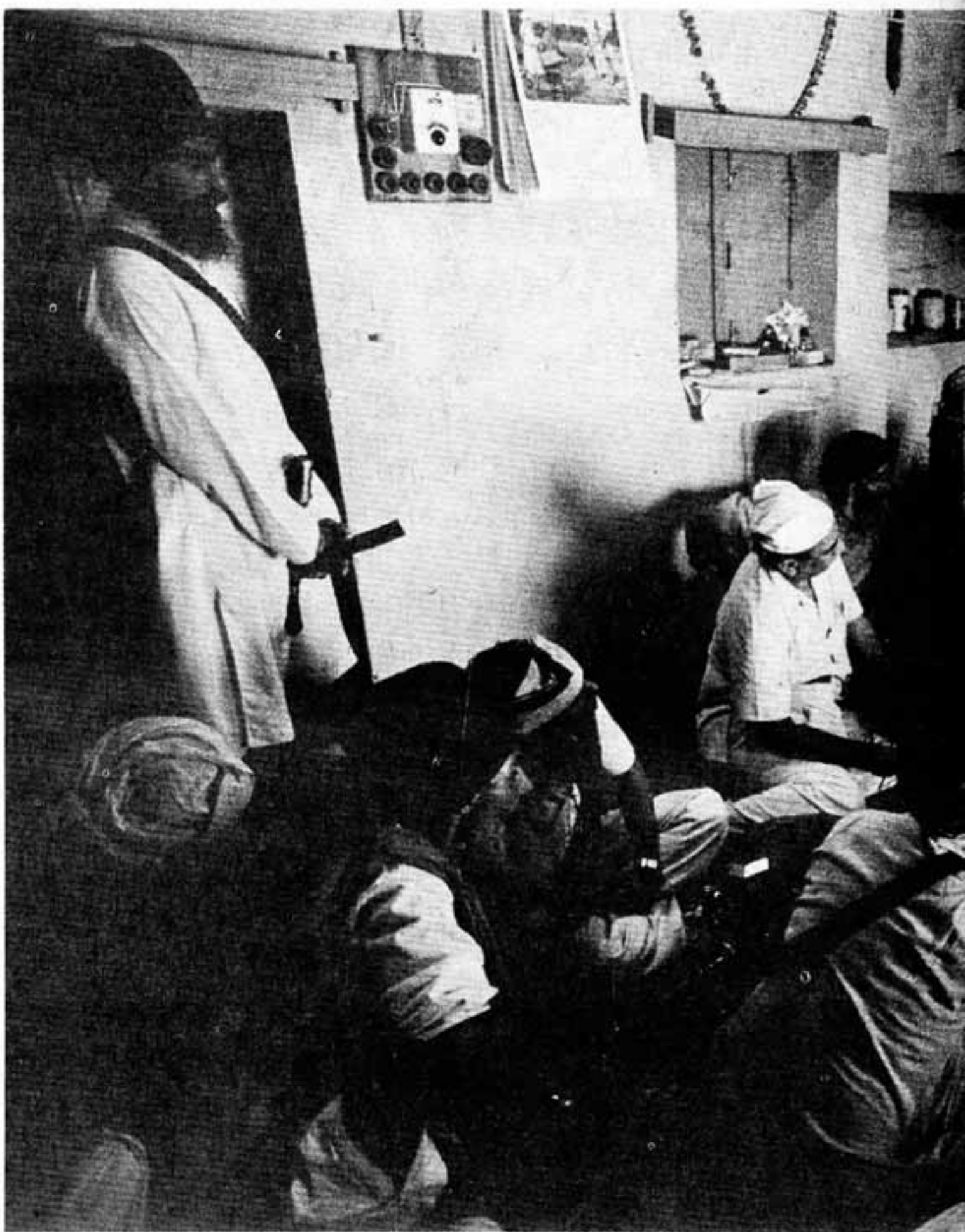
the people who created the situation."

But while reactions were varied, and often clearly defined along communal lines, they only underlined the fact that, even if the army action in Punjab was justified, it only marked the beginning of a long haul to restore the state to its old, pre-1980 state of peace, prosperity and tranquillity. And if that is to be achieved, the first step would be to make a strong effort to prevent the Hindus from claiming victory. Mrs Gandhi, at a public meeting on June 11, warned that what happened in Punjab "should not be celebrated as a victory".

That there is still plenty of goodwill between the two communities was visible on the morning of June 4 when the

Sultanwind Road market was burnt in Amritsar. In one corner stood Sohan Lal Bhatia, a son of Bhagmal Bhatia, the famous Jallianwala martyr, accusing the Government of having had his shop burnt by creating communal tension. All along, Sikh neighbours—all wearing the orange turban, a sign of protest, helped put out the fire and salvage the remains. "I have no complaint against the Sikhs. Politics will make animals out of any people," said Bhatia.

It is this store of goodwill that the Government now needs to tap. While in the towns the pro-RSS and highly committed Arya Samaj workers will have to be contained, in the villages a different, though equally firm strategy will have to



**Bhindranwale's last press conference
on the evening of June 2**

be followed with the simple, illiterate jathedars who lead the peasants. In fact the army took the first step in this direction by ordering that no jawans accept any water, cold drinks, lassi or food from people in the streets. This would discourage the increasing tendency on the part of the Hindus to look after the jawans posted in their area and to patronise them.

That is just one step to overcome the alienation which strong law and order action inevitably brings in its wake. In the Punjab villages, for example, the people are bitter with the army presence even if the conduct of the jawans has been upright. But the simple Punjabi peasant finds the tank patrols and cordon-and-search operations an unpleasant factor.

THE OPPOSITION, possibly for the first time since the Bangladesh war of 1971, unanimously supported Mrs Gandhi's action in the temple. In her turn the prime minister at a 100-minute meeting with opposition leaders in New Delhi on June 13 told them the Government would bring out a white paper with all the facts about the army action.

The army and the Government will have to tread carefully in the Punjab countryside. As a police officer in Chandigarh remarked: "The point is that the army will have to fight most of its future international wars along the Punjab plains. I am sure the jawans would value having the population on their side." Unfortunately, the current situation has

arisen in the kharif sowing season, making life extremely difficult for the farmer who can hardly stir out at night.

On the political level, the Government has already made a beginning by broadcasting the gurbani live on All India Radio from the Golden Temple. Official sources also give strong hints of more unilateral concessions as the situation stabilises in the state. Said an official: "We are treading slowly and cautiously. Our first worry was preventing a communal holocaust; and touch wood, till now nothing has happened."

The tragedy is that this too is a view from one side of the fence, for if you ask an ordinary Sikh, the death of nearly a thousand of his community at the Golden Temple, is holocaust enough, even if it happened in the course of an armed fight. The very magnitude of the killings and destruction has left him nonplussed, isolated and insecure. Even more than maintaining law and order on the ground, it is thus necessary to reassure the Sikhs. And the only way to do it now is by handing over the task of applying the balm to the wounds of beleaguered but progressive and virile community to a benevolent political leader. With President's rule already nine months old, the Constitution demands that the state be returned to popular rule within the next three months. Mrs Gandhi will now have to initiate the search for someone acceptable enough to take over the reins of a state caught even more deeply in the quagmire than Assam was a year ago.

Politically, socially or emotionally, it will not be an easy task. The army's action has touched the nerve of a sensitive community. It has been a watershed, and its crossing is fraught with long-term dangers. The sense of alienation that is now evident is understandable, but it cannot obviously be allowed to harden. And harden it will if all those who were in one way or another responsible for letting Punjab come to this pass do not look into themselves for their own share in the blame but instead try and derive advantage. The Sikhs need to ask why they allowed their temple to be stockpiled with arms. The administration must answer why it so quickly dissolved into ineffectiveness. And the Government why it allowed the whole problem to burn for three long years. If there is no introspection, if there is no understanding, and forgiveness and humanity of the kind preached by all religions, the embers of Operation Bluestar will burn a long, long time and may even ignite again.

—SHEKHAR GUPTA in Amritsar with bureau reports

